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OLD FOLKS

By Jake Arrowtop

I was fifteen years old standing in the lobby of the Badger Prairie Rest Home my grandfather had been admitted to a few weeks before. My mother had dropped me off alone, claiming she had errands to run. I had never been inside it and wondered who decided to call it “Badger Prairie.” A badger prairie would be a terrible place to rest. Badgers are mean. That’s the thing with Reservations though, everything has a hilarious name. It could have been called something else I suppose, “Eagle-Shields” or “Sleepy-Chief.” Something stoic, something romantic. The nursing home was located on a long street called Death-row. That wasn’t its official name of course, but it’s what everyone called it. A lot of old people lived there. It was a name that nobody liked but never changed.

A nurse told me that everyone was eating in the cafeteria. The eating area was bright. The walls were a clean white offset by scattered portraits of flowers. The bright pictures looked out of place in the single-colored room. I suppose flowers made people feel better. Even at funerals.

The funeral was long. The priest was named Loyd Powers but my grandfather had always called him Father Hours. He’d talk and talk and talk. There was a painting of an eagle behind where he preached that looked funny. I often stared at it until someone would nudge me to do the “peace be with you” thing. One wing was larger than the other but I guess me and my grandfather were the only ones to notice this.

Everyone else said it was beautiful or majestic, but I thought it looked hilarious. The goofy eagle didn’t stand out that day though. The box of tissues someone had given me made me uncomfortable, “Puffs Plus Lotion” it was called. It left a layer of film on my face that burned my eyes and I wanted to get up to go wash it off but my mother was crying on my shoulder so I didn’t. My face had felt like plastic and smelled like lavender. My grandfather sat at the other side of the church with his hand in his brow. I didn’t know if he was crying. I kind of hoped he was crying. I had never seen him cry. His son was dead after all. My mother said he couldn’t sit with us so I called her a bitch but left it at that.

I didn’t feel like dealing with her, even on the day of my father’s funeral.

The home had a very sanitary look about it much like a hospital.

It smelled like one too. It was a bleach smell that only existed in a place where everyone constantly washed their hands and where the floors were always scrubbed. The floor was shiny and smooth. Wheels could glide easily over it. I wondered how many people came straight from the ward to here. It wouldn't be much of a change. They'd go from one white sanitary building to another. The only difference was that this place was a little more permanent.

Everyone seemed to be in wheelchairs. There was a silent captioned TV attached to the wall that some of the folks watched while others ate their meals. I spotted my grandfather eating alone on the other side of the room. People spoke in high volumes and even then everyone constantly seemed to be saying "what?" or "who?" while plates clattered. It reminded me of stepping into a kindergarten class. I wondered if my grandfather felt this way when he first got here.

"Hi, grandpa."

He was wearing glasses, something I'd never seen him do and his dark hair had grown quite a bit, just below his shoulders. There was a wooden cane leaning against the table. It had a face carved into it of an old Indian woman, a neglected gift from my father. He sat hunched over shoveling soup in his mouth. He held the spoon like you'd hold a knife, a habit my mother despised. "He eats like a caveman," my mom would say. I often ate like that just to make her mad and when she'd try to correct me I'd tell her that cavemen didn't use spoons. A cross-eyed nurse came to the table and wanted to know if we needed anything. My grandfather ignored her and I asked for a pop.

"How are you doing?"

My grandfather blew on his soup to cool it. "What's that weather like?"

"Windy." The kind that made me duck my head and walk sideways. The kind that made me run the short distance from my mom's car to the entrance while she barely slowed to a stop. "It's always windy."

I sat for a while not saying anything. A lady at the table next to ours kept looking at me while she poured pepper into her bowl. She was pale and gray and her eyes were blank and glassy like she'd forgotten how to blink. I smiled and waved but she kept staring and pouring until she had more pepper than soup.

"So what's this place like, grandpa?"

He stopped eating. He looked at the lady that was still staring at me and shook his head. "This is horseshit."

"What is?"

"Goddamn nursing home."

The nurse dropped off a can of orange pop in front of me.

"She's been stealing from me."

"Who?"

"The shifty broad with the goofy eyes." He motioned with his chin toward the nurse that had dropped off my pop.

"Grandpa."

"Well, even if she wasn't I don't belong here. Your father would roll over in his grave if he knew I was here." He put his hand to his forehead and rubbed. "Look around, Christ that woman looks dead." He pointed to the old lady with the bowl full of pepper.

She did look dead and she was still staring. "Grandpa."

He crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. He didn't ask how I was doing and I didn't want him to.

A man I knew wheeled up to our table next to my grandfather and set his cup of coffee down. I never knew his real name but everyone called him Bouquet. He had to be the oldest man in the home if not the oldest in the entire town. I didn't know if he had any family or even where he lived. I always saw him walking around, but like my grandfather; he had recently entered into the home too. They would visit with each other from time to time before they were here. Bouquet often traveled past my grandfather's house toward town to do whatever it was he did.

Every day he wore a red trucker cap that said "Veteran" on it and a blue and black Pendleton jacket. Even in the home he had them on, but with pajama bottoms and slippers. His skin was darker than most people in town and when he'd smile, you'd see that his four bottom teeth were missing so it sort of looked like he had dull fangs on his lower jaw. He used to yell at me when I was little when I'd play in my grandfather's yard. All he'd ever say was "hutterite" loudly. But that was enough to send me running into the house. I'd hear him laughing outside. I often asked my parents why he did it and they laughed and said that was just the way Bouquet was.

My grandfather lived a few miles from town and there was a field behind his house that stretched about two miles or so. The field was covered with a yellow grass that only seemed to turn green for a couple of weeks in April. It appeared to be completely flat since it was surrounded by the rolling hills of the dull plains. No matter what time of day it was, Bouquet was crossing it with his cane in hand and he'd reach the road and follow it into town. I always wondered where he was coming from. My grandfather teased me and said he lived in the

hills and one day he'd drag me off with him.

When my family would pose for pictures in my grandfather's backyard, Bouquet always seemed to be in the background in that field. He'd be captured in time; a tiny figure just above my grandfather's smiling head, crossing a dying field. The photos chronicled his aging and in one photo he wouldn't have a cane and in another he'd have two. My grandfather would laugh at the fact that you could always tell how old the picture was by whether or not Bouquet had a cane.

Bouquet was staring at his coffee muttering something I didn't understand when he looked up at me and smiled a toothless smile. "Hutterite-boy. Get me some sugar."

"You can't have any sugar old man, they'll cut your foot off," My grandfather said.

Bouquet started muttering again. All I could make out was "goddamned hutterite" and "fucking sugar."

"Why is he calling me that?" I leaned in close to my grandfather so Bouquet couldn't hear. He was still sort of frightening, even in his wheelchair.

"Probably because your skin is a bit lighter. Like your mom's."

I thought about how that made sense while another old man with dark sunglasses on that seemed to cover his entire face wheeled up next to Bouquet. He didn't notice him. The man didn't say anything. My grandfather tapped me on the arm and pointed toward them. "Watch these two," he said with a nod.

After settling his wheelchair, the man with the sunglasses hadn't moved and I wondered if there was something wrong with him. His skin was rubbery and hung loose at the neck like he was a living decaying man. His bottom lip drooped on one side and he looked like he might have stopped breathing until he pulled off his slipper and slapped Bouquet across the face with it.

It was a slow process. Bouquet's head shot back and the coffee he was drinking spilled and splashed down the middle of his jacket. I looked at my grandfather who didn't seem to have any kind of expression on his face, he just looked on. The other people didn't seem to be making too much of a fuss about it either, some didn't even turn and watch. The man had a smile on his face that seemed unnatural given his floppy skin and he went wheeling away with as much speed as his decomposing body would allow, which turns out was a snail's pace.

We watched Bouquet take after him. He couldn't catch up. He stopped and pulled his ankle up and settled it on the knee of his other leg. He grabbed his slipper and cocked it back and took aim. His free

hand was extended in front of him with two fingers in the shape of a V to form some sort cross-hairs. He closed one eye and I imagined him lining up the man between his fingers. He missed and his slipper went in the direction of the staring lady eating her bowl of pepper. The slipper struck her in the face and she blinked her glassy eyes a few times but she showed little reaction or emotion. Bouquet flipped her off and went after the man again who had disappeared through a door. Nurses followed and the old folks that had showed any interest went back to their meals.

“That happen often?” I shook my head and finished my pop.

“That’s the fourth I’ve seen,” my grandfather said. “Bouquet has been in all of them.”

I believed that. “Did you have any problems with anyone? Any slippers come flying your way?”

“No, Bouquet always sits with me. I fly under the radar when that mean bastard is around.” My grandfather smiled for the first time since I arrived. The smile didn’t last long though. The cross-eyed nurse came by, cleaned up the coffee then left again. My grandfather sat staring at the silent TV across the room. It was a car chase. You could barely see the action though because the captions took up half of the screen. There was no dialogue. The captions would just say “crash” or “screeching” as the cars stormed through a city. My grandfather continued to watch it.

“How’s that mother of yours anyway?”

“As good as she can be, I imagine.”

My grandfather was silent.

“She lays around a lot when she’s not at work. We don’t talk too much.” I watched Bouquet come wheeling back up with a new shirt and a new cup of coffee. “She never mentions dad.”

Bouquet sat looking at us both. He had a triumphant look about him. It made me think he had caught up to the man who had slapped him. “Hutterite, hand me that sugar.” He laughed hard. I handed him a package of Splenda but he threw it back at me. He took a drink from his coffee and looked even more triumphant than before.

“You know Bouquet was the one that found us, your father and I,” my grandfather said. “He called the ambulance.”

I sat looking at Bouquet. He was stirring his coffee with his index finger and he was still smiling. I couldn’t imagine him working a phone.

“He pulled me out. Your father was already dead.”

Bouquet wasn’t smiling anymore. He sat listening to my

grandfather.

"I shouldn't have been driving. I should have called your mother. We were coming from the casino and your father and I had had a few drinks. I don't see too good at night anymore, you know?"

"Grandpa, I don't blame you."

"I know, my boy. But your mother does. And so do I."

"I can talk to mom."

"It's not that bad, really. At least I get to watch Bouquet bother everyone." Bouquet was smiling again and he threw another package of Splenda at me.

"Tell your mother to come visit me sometime."

It had been 32 days since we buried my father. They had crashed the pickup into a ditch not even a hundred feet from my grandfather's house. I was there sleeping, waiting on my father. It occurred to me that Bouquet must of have come in and called the ambulance while I was asleep. I slept through everything, Bouquet, sirens, my mother's phone-calls. It wasn't until my mother actually came to the house in the middle of the night that I learned what had happened. "I'll tell her she needs to stop by." But she wouldn't.

Lunchtime was over and everyone began wheeling and shuffling through the exits to their rooms. My grandfather said he was tired. He departed with a nod and joined the old people parade. I watched him. He supported himself with the wooden cane that my father had made. My grandfather had always shied away from ever using it. He insisted he could walk on his own. His steps were short and deliberate. The cane would rise and fall and a click of wood on floor would accompany each step. With my father's cane in front of him he disappeared through the door.